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02 August 2010

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Zhang, J. J. (2010) 'Brand(ing) kinmen : a tourism perspective.', International journal of entrepreneurship and small business., 9 (4). pp. 407-433.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1504/IJESB.2010.032402>

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Brand(ing) Kinmen: A Tourism Perspective¹

J.J. Zhang

Abstract

The recent proliferation of academic works on ‘place branding’ has led to a burgeoning interest in ‘island branding’. This paper posits that islands are geographical features that possess unique characteristics and experience distinctive circumstances, and thus deserve to be analysed on their own terms. In particular, it explores the intricacies in the branding of Kinmen Island, Taiwan, as a battlefield tourism destination. This case study confronts the typical island lure – of sun, sand and sea – and creates an opportunity for some distinct positioning in the global tourism market. Discussion shows the importance for tourism planners to recognise the unique character of the island in order to localise development projects in terms of its geographical particularity and landscape identity. Furthermore, it is argued that the branding of Kinmen is not merely a top-down process; the Kinmen brand is a result of both top-down ‘imagineering’ efforts by the state and bottom-up branding practices by the local entrepreneurs, Kinmen people and tourists. In all, it is believed that tourists’ identification of an island has to be substantiated by locals’ self-recognition with the island’s identity so as to sustain any branding effort.

Keywords: island branding; battlefield tourism; local entrepreneur; tourism planning; landscape identity; place experience; post-Cold War Taiwan; Kinmen (Quemoy).

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¹ Zhang, J. J. (2010) 'Brand(ing) Kinmen: a tourism perspective', *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, 9 (4), pp. 407-433.

1. Introduction: Island Brands and Island Branding

The unbranded state has a difficult time attracting economic *and* political attention. Image and reputation are becoming essential parts of the state's strategic equity.

(Van Ham, 2004: 17; emphasis in original)

While Van Ham might be referring to a particular geographical unit in this instance, he is reflecting the wider phenomenon of 'place branding'. There has been a growing interest of late in both the public sector and academic arena with place branding. Branding of places is seen by country and city governments as a marketing tool to attract investors and tourists (Allen, 2007). In this era of globalisation and technological advancement, countries and increasingly, cities, seek to differentiate themselves as they compete amongst each other to be financial centres and choice locations for foot-loose industries. Moreover, as the World Tourism Organisation acknowledges, tourists, with increased mobility, are treating tourism destinations as fashion accessories (Morgan *et al.*, 2002) that reflect their self-identities. In a semiotic society, signs and images give meaning to consumption (Baudrillard, 1968), and brands are able to create and transmit them efficiently (Freire, 2005). A brand thus goes beyond its original function "to distinguish and identify"; it assumes "fetishistic qualities of image and power" as advertisers craft "associations, attributes and characterizations designed to induce a psychological response..." (Donald and Gammack, 2007: 46). It is no wonder that 'destination branding' (Morgan *et al.*, 2002) has landed itself such a high priority in the eyes of tourism planners.

It is not the intention of this paper to provide a comprehensive literature review of academic research on place branding. Moreover, Dinnie (2004) and Gould and Skinner (2007) have been excellent in capturing the changing approaches and emerging trends in the literature. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to realise that the place branding lexicon typically evolves around the likes of 'nation branding' (Anholt, 2004; Gudjonsson, 2005, 'city branding' (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2006; Donald and Gammack, 2007), 'place branding' (Papadopoulos, 2004; Anholt, 2005), 'geo-branding' (Freire, 2005) and 'destination branding' (Morgan *et al.*, 2002). There seems to be a dearth of research that

focuses on ‘island branding’ per se. Although one may argue that ‘islands’ can be subsumed under ‘place’ or ‘destination’, they are in fact geographical features that possess unique characteristics and experience distinctive circumstances (Baldacchino, 2005). Furthermore, I argue that the word ‘island’ is a brand in its own rights. Mention “island tourism”, and images of sun, sand and sea will emerge in one’s mind. Hence, islands might be facing the threat of being homogenised in an age of globalisation as tourism planners attempt to transform islands into identically manicured beach-resort landscapes for tourists (Zhang, 2007). The challenge then, is for planners to recognise the unique character of each island in order to localise development projects in terms of its geographical particularity and landscape identity. As such, islands deserve to be analysed on their own terms (Baldacchino, 2007) and this is where island branding comes into play. This paper discusses the nuances of island brands and island branding in the context of the former military island of Kinmen, Taiwan. Due to the complexity of island branding and its relationship to different audiences, I focus specifically on the tourism aspect of Kinmen Island.

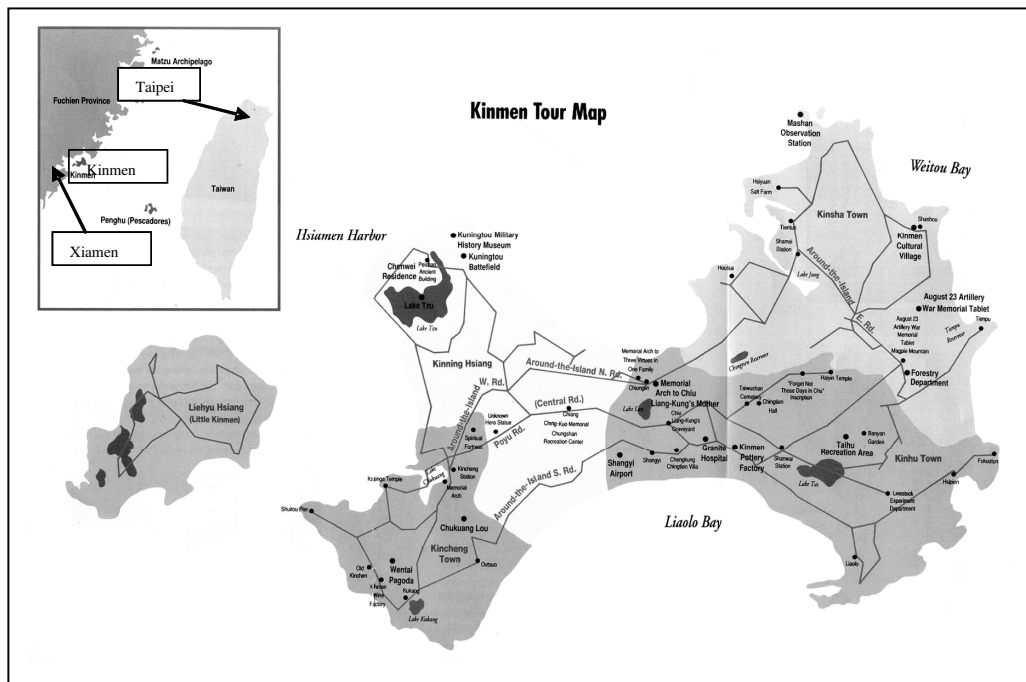
2. Setting the Stage: Kinmen in Context

2.1 Kinmen as a battlefield

Before explicating the objectives of this paper, let me foreground the historical events that form the basis of Kinmen’s battlefield identity. Covering an area of 150km² and a population of 72,000, Kinmen² is located 350km southwest of Taipei, Taiwan, but a mere 10km from the city of Xiamen in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Figure 1). The island became a military stronghold of the Kuomintang’s (KMT) Nationalist Army after its forces retreated from the mainland during the Civil War with the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1949. Kinmen, together with Matsu and a number of other off-shore islands were intended to be “stepping stones”

² Kinmen is an archipelago consisting of 12 islands. This paper focuses on the 2 main islands, namely ‘Big Kinmen’ and ‘Little Kinmen’. Unless otherwise stated, ‘Kinmen’ refers to both islands (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Map of Kinmen, Taiwan



(Source: <http://tour.kinmen.gov.tw>)

for Chiang Kai-shek's forces to reclaim the mainland. Initial attempts by the communists to capture Kinmen were thwarted by KMT's victory in the Gunningtou Battle on Kinmen in late 1949. The onset of the global Cold War and the American doctrine of containment further acted as a deterrence to the communist's plans for invasion. However, the First and Second Straits Crisis in 1954 and 1958 respectively, saw the PRC engaging Kinmen in fierce artillery battles. Intervention by the United States (US) denied the prospect of a take-over. Therefore, the status of Kinmen had and still has symbolic meaning for Taiwan in the wider geopolitical context. The involvement of the US in the prevention of a CCP take-over testifies to the importance of the island's strategic position as a bastion against communist threat. Indeed as Chen Chao-Jin, Director General of the County Government Research and Development Department, stressed, "Without Kinmen, there will be no Taiwan." (Personal interview, 23 May 2006).

As a result of these events, Kinmen became a highly militarised area. Fortresses, pillboxes and underground tunnels can be found on the island and as much as one-third of

Taiwan's total army was stationed on the island, outnumbering the local population of 60,000 (Szonyi, 2005).³ Apart from the conscripted soldiers, a militia system had also been set up whereby civilian villages were transformed into 'combat villages' (Chi, 2004). In 1956, the KMT government introduced the "Experimental Scheme of War Area Administration on Kinmen and Matsu", which subjected the islands to absolute military control (*Jinmen xianzhi*, 1992, cited in Chi, 2004). In Kinmen, the troops were the main consumer base that sustained the local economy until 1992 when tourism became increasingly important.

2.2 From battlefield to tourist destination

With the abolition of martial law in 1992, the gradual de-militarisation and opening up of Kinmen took shape. This resulted in its evolution from a military outpost to a tourist destination. With the partial withdrawal of troops from the island,⁴ the economic void left behind by the garrison had to be filled up. Tourism emerged as the lifeline of Kinmen. The military landscape, defence installations and infrastructure were readily utilised for tourism development. In addition, according to Yang and Hsing (2001: 78), Kinmen's "culture industries⁵... have [also] become the potential cultural consumption resources that... [help] long-term ... reconstruction and regeneration since the abolition of martial law".

Although the majority of tourists are Taiwanese, the establishment of the "mini three links"⁶ in January 2001 meant that PRC tourists are also allowed to visit Kinmen.⁷ According to the Ministry of Transport and Communications, "the transit of people and commodities from Kinmen to China has grown substantially over the past two years since the 'mini three links' were established" (*The Taiwan Economic News*, 7 February 2003). The tourism planners recognise the great potential of the Chinese market and have even

³ Although the garrison size was never disclosed, it is estimated at 100,000.

⁴ It is estimated that the garrison size will be reduced to 5000.

⁵ Apart from war heritage, Kinmen also boasts well preserved traditional houses of South-Min architecture. Nature tourism has also been promoted recently, especially the 300 bird species found on the island.

⁶ The three links refer to economic and social links for direct trade, postal and shipping between Kinmen and Matsu of Taiwan, and Xiamen and Fuzhou of PRC (*The Economist*, 6 January 2001).

⁷ Previously, Kinmen was primarily visited by domestic Taiwanese tourists.

made amendments to sensitive captions in the various war museums so as not to offend the PRC tourists. Such efforts to tone down the otherwise hostile attitude towards the communist regime in China will be discussed in a later section.

In short, tourism is seen as an important activity since the de-militarisation of Kinmen. Concerted efforts have been and are still being taken to increase tourism arrivals and receipts. Therefore it is timely to examine the role of place branding in promoting the island as a battlefield tourism destination.

3. Objectives, Argument and Method

The objectives of this study are three-fold. Firstly, I seek to discuss the current efforts by tourism planners in establishing a battlefield tourism brand for Kinmen. This is done by analysing how they go about representing the island's military past both in tourism promotion and in (re)-creating the battlefield tourism sites. Secondly, I investigate how local entrepreneurs' business innovations and tourists' behaviour contribute to the sustainability of the Kinmen Brand. Lastly, I show that top-down branding efforts by the government and bottom-up initiatives by local entrepreneurs, together with tourists' behaviour are interrelated in a dialectical manner. In other words, the branding of Kinmen is not merely a top-down process; the Kinmen Brand is a result of both top-down 'imagineering' efforts by the state and bottom-up initiatives by the locals and tourists. Moreover, the brand of an island constitutes its identity, and when used for tourism promotion, is supposed to conjure up a certain geographical image amongst the tourists. The tourists' identification of an island has to be substantiated by locals' self-recognition with the island's identity so as to sustain any branding effort. It is only with the recognition and participation by the locals that an island's brand can be sustainable.

Research data for this paper is garnered from fieldwork conducted in Kinmen from May to July 2006 and again in December 2006. Respondents were divided into four groups, namely the tourism officials, local entrepreneurs, Kinmen people and tourists. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. A total of ten representatives from both the Kinmen County Government and Kinmen National Park (KMNP), the two main

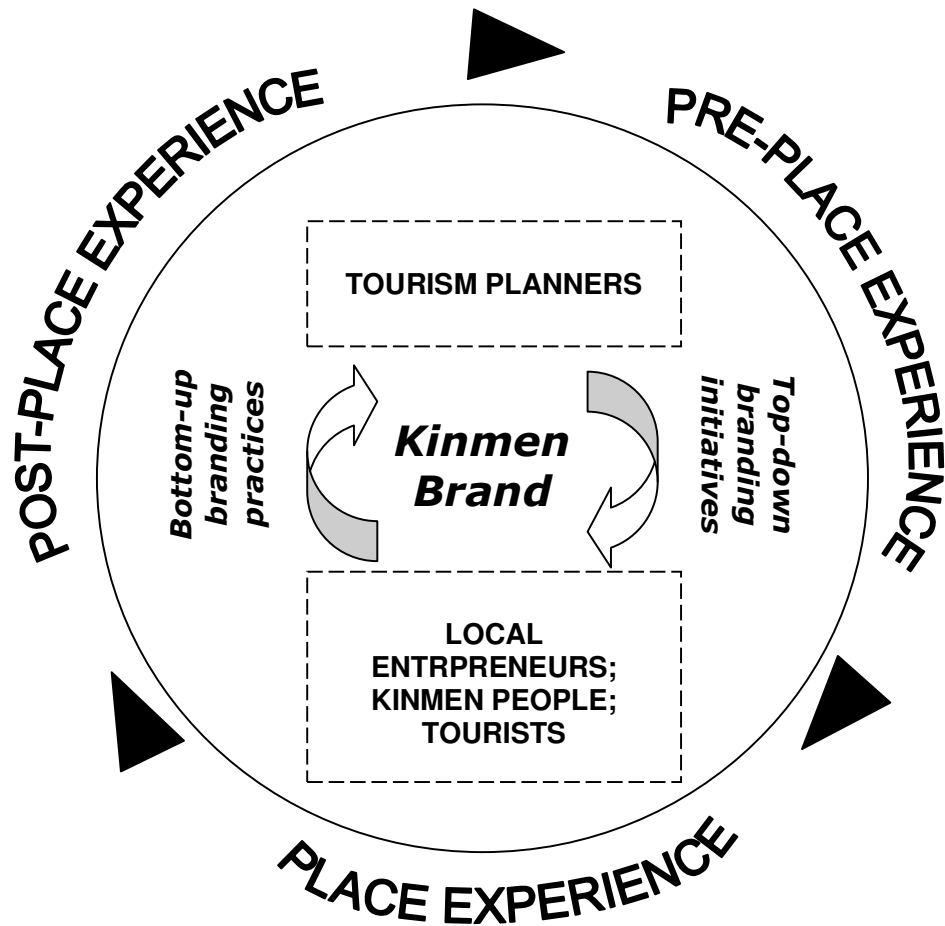
planners of Kinmen's battlefield tourism landscape, were interviewed. Insights were also based on interviews with eight local entrepreneurs, whose business ventures were in one way or another related to Kinmen's battlefield tourism.⁸ Informal interviews proved to be useful when interacting with local residents. Apart from the practicality of this method, the informal setting made it possible for me to "understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives" (Valentine, 2005: 111). Perceptions of the Kinmen brand could also be gathered during friendly conversations with tourists. For a research that requires the analysis of brand experience, participant observation proved to be useful. This was mainly conducted at the various war museums, battlefield sites and souvenir shops where the Kinmen brand was created, promoted and experienced.

4. Concepts and Conceptual Framework

In this exploratory paper, I attempt to conceptualise top-down branding efforts by the tourism planners and bottom up branding contributions by the local entrepreneurs, Kinmen people and tourists in a dialectical manner. Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of this paper. The arrows serve to represent the interaction amongst the various stakeholders in the creation of the Kinmen battlefield tourism brand. Thus, the Island (Kinmen) Brand is conceptualised not as an end product by itself, but a dynamic and fluid imagination being constantly shaped and negotiated by state mandated branding effort as well as by locals and tourists.

⁸ For example operators of tour agencies and local entrepreneurs producing tourist souvenirs and products.

Figure 2 Tourist Destination Branding Model



The incorporation of emotion adds another dimension to the discussion as it affects the branding process. The study of emotions and feelings in geography is not new.⁹ However, ‘emotional geography’ is of recent origin. In an influential editorial by Anderson and Smith (2001) in the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* entitled “Emotional Geographies”, the authors highlight the importance of emotions in maintaining geography’s critical edge. Similarly, Davidson *et al.* (2005) edited a collection of essays with the same theme. Observing an ‘emotional turn’ in geography

⁹ Early developments stem from the humanistic and behavioural schools. Tuan (1974) talks about ‘topophilia’ – the “affective bond between people and place or setting” (p. 4). Attempt to ‘map’ the feelings about the urban environment (Spencer & Dixon, 1983) is also noticed.

and adopting a ‘spatially engaged approach’ to the study of emotions, the authors articulate that:

A genuine emotional geography cannot just deal in feelings... It must try to express something that is ineffable in such objectifying languages, namely a sense of emotional involvement with people and places, rather than emotional detachment from them... An emotional geography, then, attempts to understand emotion – experientially and conceptually – in terms of its socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorised subjective mental states.

(Davidson *et al.*, 2005:2-3)

In his paper on “The place of emotions within place”, Urry (2005) makes explicit the connection between the ‘tourist gaze’ and ‘emotional experience of place’. He posits that “[e]motions are intimately tied into place...” and “[t]he practice of landscape entails an intangible resource”, realised through the “visual consumption of place especially by those ‘touring’” (Urry, 2005: 77). For this paper, I pursue the spatiality of emotions in the branding of Kinmen as a battlefield tourism destination.

Allen’s (2003) arrangement of the ‘brand experience’ of a place into ‘pre-place experience’, ‘place-experience’, and ‘post-place experience’ (incorporated into the Tourist Destination Branding Model – Figure 2) provides a temporal-spatial perspective for a more nuanced understanding of the branding process. He espouses that a tourist will be exposed to the brand experience before, during and after the tour. Therefore, branding does not stay at the promotion level but takes place throughout the entire tour experience. As such, branding efforts by both the tourism planners and the local entrepreneurs are discussed based on the three phases, with the former being more active and prominent in the first two, and the latter contributing more significantly to the third.

I will now turn to the branding strategies adopted by the government to transform Kinmen into a battlefield tourism destination, before shedding light on the contributions by local entrepreneurs, Kinmen people and tourists.

5. From Commemoration to Commercialisation

After the lifting of martial law in 1992, the 'Battlefield Military Administration' was replaced by a civilian county government. Kinmen was opened to tourism in the same year; attracting the first Taiwanese tour groups to the island. A total of 247,264 tourists visited Kinmen in 1993, and this increased two-fold to 531,683 in 1997 (*Kinmen Statistics*, 2006). Tourist arrivals consist mainly of domestic tourists from mainland Taiwan (78.5%), with the rest primarily represented by PRC tourists (21.3%) since the establishment of the 'three mini links'. Several reasons explain why people were attracted to Kinmen. As the battlefield of conflicts between PRC and Taiwan, Kinmen was inaccessible until 1992. The curious wanted to "see it for themselves" what Kinmen was really like. Retired soldiers who had once served on the island also returned to reminisce the past, usually with the company of family members. After the establishment of the 'three mini links', ferry services between Xiamen and Kinmen became available, and tourists from the PRC were keen to explore the "mysterious military bastion" that the PLA surprisingly failed to capture. The battlefield landscape that represented a bastion of military might and symbol of war, was transformed almost overnight into a *battlefield landscape* of appeal for tourist consumption.

In 1995, KMNP, a subsidiary of the Taiwanese central government's Ministry of Interior, was established and joined ranks with the county government's tourism bureau as official planners of Kinmen's tourism landscape. Both agencies are referred here as 'tourism planners' as they have been actively involved in the transformation of Kinmen from a military stronghold to a tourist destination¹⁰ Military infrastructure and facilities that were left behind by the shrinking garrison¹¹ were rapidly re-appropriated to become tourist attractions. War museums are no longer just a place to commemorate the "heroics" of the KMT army, but became tourist attractions and sights of curiosity.

¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the possible conflicts between the county government and the central government subsidiary.

¹¹ In line with the de-militarisation of Kinmen, the number of soldiers based on the island has been reducing from the initial 100,000 to the target of 5000.

6. Branding Kinmen: Government's Initiatives

According to Allen (2007: 64), government or quasi-governmental tourism agencies, as important players within the stakeholder tourism framework, “typically occupy a leadership role in constructing the marketing/ brand framework”. However, this is apparent for Kinmen only in recent years. I would argue that branding efforts in terms of marketing Kinmen island as a battlefield tourism destination is a phenomenon of late. As Gao Shu-Zhen, Director of a local tour agency concurs:

There is little need to market or brand the place during the early 90s when Kinmen was opened for tourism. Tourists from Taiwan mainland arrived in flocks purely out of curiosity to see for themselves the military bastion that they have long heard of but never been to.

(Personal interview, 20 June 2006)

Nevertheless, a change in the central government's development strategies for off-shore islands leads to renewed interest in the battlefield identity of Kinmen. Previously, a certain amount of development fund was appropriated by the central government to an off-shore island according to its population. There was no monitoring of fund usage. This led to irresponsible and excessive spending in the construction sector. In 2005, the central government shifted the administration of the off-shore Development Fund from the Construction Bureau to the Council for Economic Development (Liu, 2007). An Off-shore Islands Development Fund Office was subsequently set up to study the unique characteristics and identity of each off-shore island, so as to determine its direction of development. For Kinmen, the battlefield image was recognised as the most important character and this explains the current efforts by tourism planners to develop Kinmen's battlefield tourism brand. The ‘pre-place’ branding strategies and ‘place brand experience’ (Allen, 2003) are discussed in the following sections.

6.1 Pre-place branding strategies

McLaren (1998: 27) describes the media as “dream weavers and spin doctors”. After all, tourism is really about discovering or even creating a destination and then packaging and marketing it. Conversely, Dann (1996) argues cogently that tourism can in fact be

considered a language. Here, I propose that images of tourist destinations found in the media constitute an imperative component to the language of tourism. Magnetic and powerful images can be compelling enough to fire the imagination and awake the desires of people (Cohen, 1982). Such is the utility of pre-place branding. Imaging results in landscapes being promoted and commodified as “touristscapes”. In the case of Kinmen, images of its battlefield landscape appear in brochures (Plate 6.1), travel magazines, newspapers, television commercials, the Internet (Plate 6.2) and even in books and films (Plate 6.3). Although appearing in diverse sources, these images only have one objective - to communicate to people, and in doing so, entice them to make the journey. Hence, potential tourists already possess a pre-place brand experience of battlefield Kinmen even before they set foot on the island. As Kotler *et al.* (2001) state, the unique positioning of Hong Kong as a tourism destination, South Korea as an automotive stronghold and Tokyo as a financial hub has been well publicised and entrenched through portrayals in print and popular media. This testifies that a product, however unique, requires communication for strong brand equity to accumulate.

I posit that because imaging is such a forceful art of persuasion, the commonality in portrayals of “battlefield” in the popular media serves to shape and construct people’s imaginings of Kinmen. In other words, people are socialized into accepting and perpetuating the images of the ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990). As Urry (1990: 10) highlights, tourists are akin to semioticians, “reading the landscape for signifiers of certain pre-established notions or signs derived from various discourses of travel and tourism”. Clearly then, when in contact with such popular media, tourists learn how, where and what to gaze as the pre-place brand unfolds. These, I contend, are structured and maintained by the images. Indeed, landscape realities are reinforced by branding.

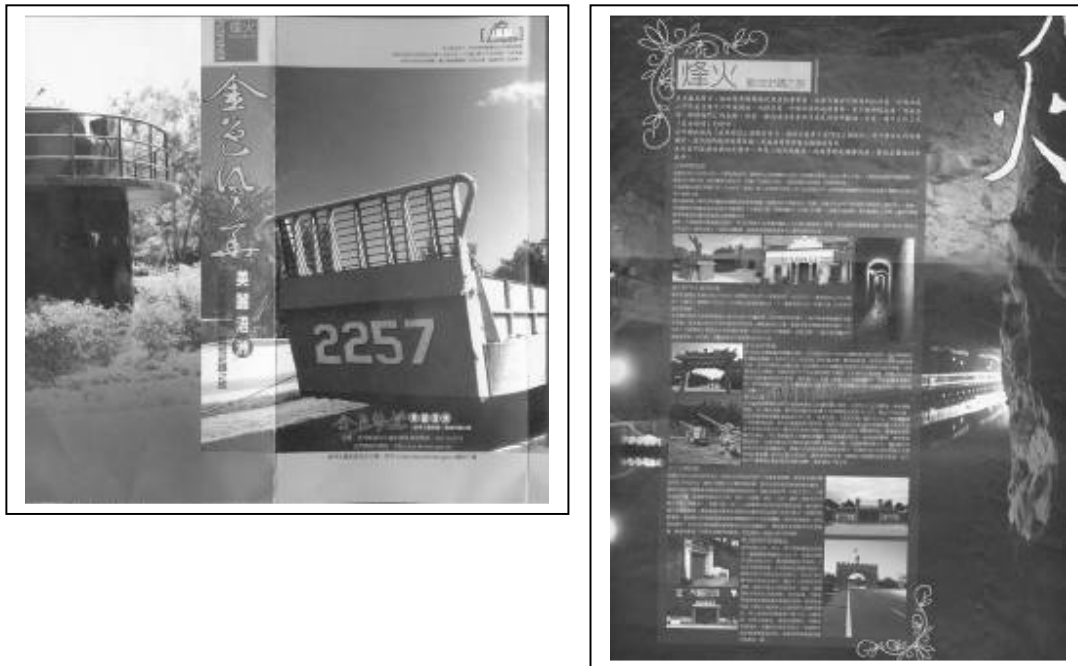


Plate 6.1 Tourist brochure advertising Kinmen's battlefield attractions
(Source: <http://tour.kinmen.gov.tw>)



Plate 6.2 Website on the latest battlefield attraction – The Kinmen Civil Defence Tunnel
(Source: <http://tour.kinmen.gov.tw>)



Plate 6.3 A cinematic representation of the 1958 Artillery Battle (left) and Battlefield Kinmen in a historical text (right)

(Source: <http://shopping.pchome.com.tw>)

6.2 The place brand experience

The branding of Kinmen does not stop at the promotion phase; the Kinmen brand is being continually created and experienced *during* the tour itself. As Kotler (2004: 12) argues, “Places are more difficult to brand than products. Every place has a history and heritage that will affect its image.” Indeed, Kinmen is no *tabula rasa*. Like it or not, the quintessential identity of the island, lies not in the sun, sand and sea, or even the accidental preservation of its ecosystem made possible by minimal anthropogenic disturbance during the martial law period; it is the battlefield heritage that breathes life into the island’s tourism landscape. Therefore, as tourism planners are “confronted by increasing product parity, substitutability, and competition” (Morgan *et al.*, 2002, cited in Allen, 2007: 61), branding an island destination in terms of its geographical particularity and landscape identity becomes even more pertinent. Moreover, place brands “should include sensations and psychological traits that enrich the place’s meaning and augment the tourist’s experience” (Freire, 2005: 356). The following sections elucidate such experiential aspects.

6.2.1 Placing memories: Reinforcing the Kinmen Brand *in situ*

One of the strategies adopted by the tourism planners in creating ‘place brand experience’ (Allen, 2003) on Kinmen Island is to bring tourists to the actual battle sites. Such ‘authenticity’ not only appeals to the tourists but also allow the planners to take advantage of the sites’ emotional geographies and “multiple levels of sedimented history” (Yeoh and Kong, 1996: 55, cited in Muzaini, 2004: 52). In particular, emotions could be effectively invoked when memories of the war years are triggered by the display of war relics or narration of historical events *in situ*. Visitors “not only think about but also ‘see’ the past” (*ibid*). Visits to such sites then reinforce the battlefield brand as the relationship between the place and its “customers” is deepened (Allen, 2007). I shall use the example of Gunningtou Battle Museum and various war relics to explicate.

The Gunningtou Battle Museum (Plate 6.4) was built in 1984 to commemorate the heroics of the KMT army during the battle of Gunningtou in October 1949. The communists from Mainland China had attempted to capture the island, but to no avail after 56 hours of deterrence by Chiang Kai-shek’s forces. The museum was built at Gunningtou where the battle was fought, and being “the first major KMT victory in many months of the long civil war, Gunningtou became a symbol of the survival of the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan” (Szonyi, 2005: 88).



Plate 6.4 Façade of Gunningtou Battle Museum

The presence of pillboxes, anti-parachuting fortresses and tankers surrounding the museum serves to cement the past for the present and add to the military ambience. Inside the museum, tourists are greeted with a wall map that depicts the details of the Gunningtou Battle, such as routes taken by the armed forces and the number of casualties suffered. They are then directed by the tour guide to view a series of 13 murals (Plate 6.5). These landscape paintings narrate the various events that took place before, during and after the battle; concentrating on KMT's preparation for war, PLA's invasion, the fierce fighting that took place, and the eventual surrender of the communist soldiers at Gunningtou. Collectively, the artists apply their "artistic and historical imaginations to the creation of a glorious past" (Osborne, 1992: 250). According to one of my informants, the venue and time stated in the paintings "create a kind of reality...as though you are in the battle yourself" (Taiwanese tourist; personal communication, 23 May 2006).



Plate 6.5 One of the 13 murals on display

Furthermore, a rectangular red carpet is laid in front of one of the paintings showing Chiang Kai-shek surveying the Kinmen coastline (Plate 6.6). The tour guide would enthusiastically highlight that the red carpet area was the "exact spot where the late president stood in the painting". Undoubtedly, existential authenticity interacts with the

locale to create an emotional experience, be it nationalistic or that of empathy, for the visitors. This in turn reinforces Kinmen's battlefield tourism brand.



Plate 6.6 Red carpet demarcating the exact spot where Chiang Kai-shek stood

The Gunningtou Battle museum tour ends with a coach ride to the 'Ancient Bungalow' (depicted in the mural), the site where "heavy street fighting" took place. The dilapidated building bears the 'scars' of the battle, with bullet holes and destroyed sections of the wall still visible. A plaque stands in front of this war relic, narrating the fierce cross firing that took place there (Plate 6.7). As one of the tourists acknowledged, "This is what we saw just now in the mural. I can really feel what it was like back then... can imagine that it was a fierce battle" (Taiwanese tourist; personal communication, 23 May 2006). This exemplifies the notion that "[e]motions are intimately tied into place" (Urry, 2005: 77), and a well of opportunity to utilise and manage emotional geographies in the island branding process. Concomitantly, the murals help to reinforce the emotional interaction between tourists and the war relics.



Plate 6.7 Fierce fighting at the 'Ancient Bungalow' and as it stands today

In recent years, the battlefield brand of Kinmen has taken on a more diplomatic approach. Captions accompanying the paintings have been altered to “provide a more objective version of the history and to show an increased sensitivity towards the PRC tourists” (Huang Tzu-Chuan - Chief of Interpretation and Education Section, KMNP, personal interview, 23 May 2006). The reference of the PLA as ‘communist bandits’ (共匪), for example, has been changed to the more neutral term of “communist soldiers” (共军). Such a move attests to the idea of ‘landscape as a palimpsest’, where meanings can be (re)inscribed (Duncan and Duncan, 1989) depending on the politics of consumption. It is therefore evident that place branding does possess a ‘public diplomacy’ façade (Anholt, 2006).

6.2.2 Branding through simulation and simulacra

Re-creating war memories through simulation is another method adopted in producing the place brand experience. For example, different forms of simulation are designed for visitors at the Aug.23 Artillery Battle Museum (823 Museum)¹² (Plate 6.8). It is a ‘non place-specific’ memorial, built to remember the dead and provide detailed historical records of the artillery battle, which caused the residents to live in agony for 44 days under heavy bombardment. A total of 474,910 shells fell on the island, creating devastating destruction and loss of lives.

¹² Known as “823 Museum” because the artillery battle took place on 23 August 1958.



Plate 6.8 Façade of 823 Museum

Visitors are greeted with a series of historical photos and descriptions narrating the battle. Also, small television screens show black-and-white footages of media reporting on the 1958 battle. These capture the visitors' attention and serve to substantiate the photos by 'enlivening' history. As Muzaini (2004) has shown, photos and other graphics can serve as a form of simulation, "provid[ing] 'visual markers' (Osborne, 1998) to help visitors imagine the past" (p.56). In fact, in this case, visitors can go beyond *imagining* and literally *see* the past; allowing them to relate to the event easily. The subtitles in the footages serve as 'text' for the tourism planners to effectively get their brand message across.

Moving beyond the visual, the museum also attempts to re-create the lived experience of the Kinmen locals – in the form of "Life in the underground [bomb] shelters". A replica of a granite-carved bomb shelter is put on display, allowing visitors to enter and experience it. The photo showing a Kinmen resident seeking refuge testifies its authenticity. A typical remark during my participant observation was that of senior members of Taiwanese tour groups reminding their children about the "difficult life back then" and "not to take the peace for granted". Therefore, verisimilitudes in the museum not only serve as representations of the past in a physical sense, but also "non-verbal 'documents' in the landscape [that] can be powerful visual signs, conveying messages forcefully..." (Baker, 1992: 5). As seen from this example, Kinmen's battlefield brand is

not restricted to the tourism context; its identity is also engaged and rationalised by the adult tourists at the moral level to educate the young.

Of all the exhibits, the ‘Battlefield Virtual Reality’ show is most popular. Instead of ‘bringing’ the past to the present, it ‘brings’ visitors back to the past in a room that provides a 3-minute “battlefield experience”. Visitors are presented with footages (on a screen in front of them) of everyday peaceful life in Kinmen till the first artillery shell landed. This is accompanied by sound and motion effects; simulating the tremors of the ground, with explosions and cries filling the room. Such ‘bombardment experience’ transcends the visual-centric displays earlier. It not only simulates history, but also *stimulates* the senses of the visitors, engaging them in a sensuous moment, entangling them with miseries of the past, exploiting emotional geographies to the fullest! One of the tourists commented, “That was so real. I can really feel what it was like back then.” (Taiwanese tourist; personal communication, 24 May 2006). Huang Tzu-Chuan explained:

We want our visitors to have a more encompassing experience. Not only can they see the exhibits, they can also feel them. This way, it is easier for them to empathise with the historical event. The school kids enjoyed it [the ‘virtual reality’] the most. We also want to educate them not to take peace for granted.¹³

(Personal interview, 23 May 2006)

The Rushan Old Barrack at the KMNP’s headquarters is a vivid example that explores the branding process through simulacra (i.e. exhibits that are not authentic but nevertheless having a strong resemblance to historical artefacts) . The military-themed park exhibits the various weapons used by the KMT army. A mixture of authentic and model weapons manned by wax soldiers with expressions of anxiety, form the background to the staged battle (Plate 6.9). Green-coloured sand bags, camouflaged walls and a command centre mimicking the “actual situation during war times” create the setting of a barrack. At regular intervals, audio effects of bombing and air raid sirens would be played to add to the ambience.

¹³ Disneyland uses similar tactics to bring an idealised past or dangerous present to consumers in a safe way.

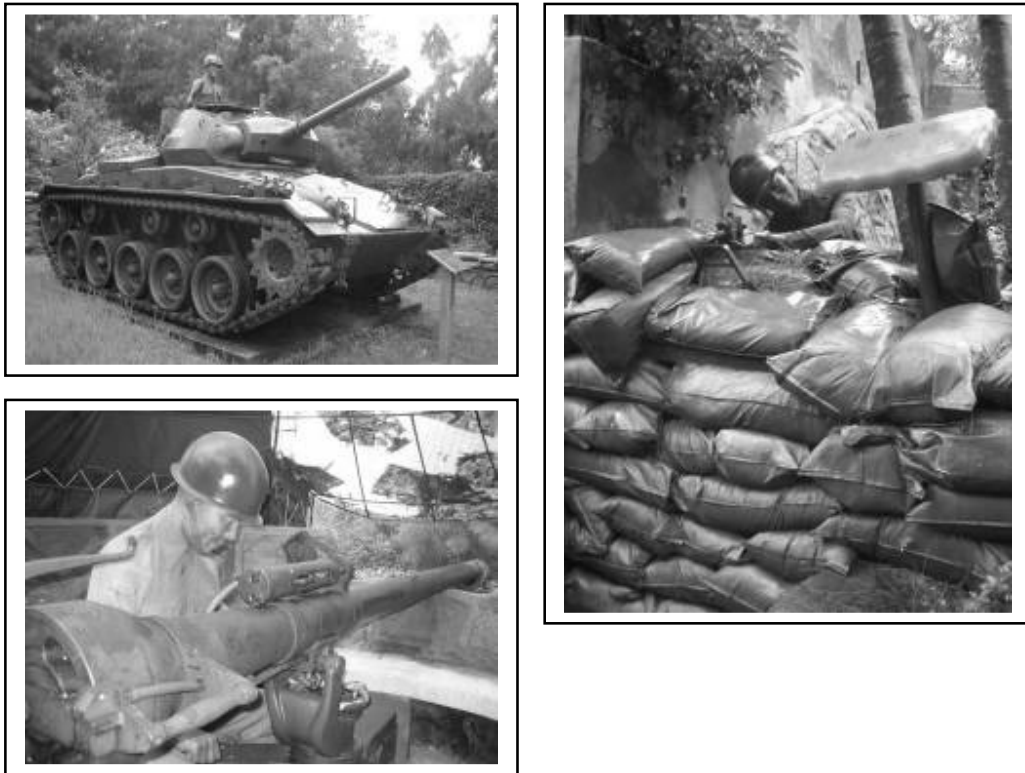


Plate 6.9 Wax figures “manning” various weapons at the Rushan Old Barrack

Visitors, both locals and tourists can be seen “participating” in the pseudo battle by posing playfully with the wax figures or helping the gunners “load” their guns. Such caricature of battle scenes marks a different approach in the production of Kinmen’s place brand experience as discussed hitherto. In fact, the boundaries between the authentic and inauthentic are blurred in the production of the tourism landscape. When interviewed, Su Cheng-Chi, Chief of KMNP’s Planning and Management Department, replied:

This is an interesting way to let the people interact with the exhibits. In fact, if this is successful, we have plans to develop the whole island into a theme park, concentrating on providing tourists with battlefield experience. We can let the tourists put on our army uniform, eat army food, and re-enact the battle. We can even integrate with paint ball games, something that is popular amongst the youngsters nowadays. We can also provide photo-taking services and if they are interested, they can purchase the uniform, as a souvenir.

(Personal interview, 2 June 2006)

Apparently, the production of battlefield tourism landscape through re-creating the war memories is increasingly being commercialised; through various simulacra focusing on the touristic experience rather than authenticity of display. Indeed, the “image takes over the original” (Eco, 1986, cited in Freire, 2005: 355) for such fabricated events (Boorstin, 1992). When asked for his view on the possible ‘de-sacralisation’ of the former battlefield through such staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1976), General (retired) Liao, who has served on Kinmen before, begged to differ:

We have to change with the times. Although I strongly feel that we should maintain vigilant and that the young generation should still possess a war mentality, there is nothing to stop the state from achieving this through the ‘fun’ way. National education can be taught using the ‘fun’ method. Maybe it is more effective.

(Personal interview, 4 July 2006)

Therefore, the branding of Kinmen’s battlefield landscape not only possesses underlying geopolitical agenda, but also considers consumers’ preferences. Indeed, the symbolic significance of the Kinmen Brand takes precedence over the authenticity of historical reproduction in modern day consumption. Furthermore, as Kotler *et al.* (2001: 318) highlight, “glossy photographs of sunsets, beaches, buildings and events need to have some relationship to what tourists actually experience; otherwise places run the risk of losing tourist goodwill and generating bad word of mouth”. The excellent attractions portray the battlefield image strongly. This not only provides Kinmen with its unique selling point but also facilitates strong and convincing branding.

7. Of Kaoliang, Bullets and Knives: Local Entrepreneurs, Kinmen People and Tourists as Branding Agents

Branding of Kinmen by the tourism planners alone has its limitations. Although it may be successful amongst the tourists, the locals themselves need to identify with the brand of the island as a battlefield tourism destination. I argue that tourists' *identification of* an island should be substantiated by locals' *self-recognition with* the island's *identity* so as to sustain any tourism branding effort. It is only with the recognition and participation by the locals that tourism can be sustainable. In this case, the locals should be given more autonomy in shaping their battlefield tourism landscape. This serves to inculcate a more intimate sense of place and self-recognition amongst the Kinmen people. The following section provides a glimpse of how local entrepreneurs, Kinmen locals and tourists are also branding agents of Battlefield Kinmen.

As Allen (2007: 64) argues, "While government agencies often lead brand initiatives, the stakeholder domains within which they operate are arguably more difficult to manage than those faced by corporate brand managers." In the case of Kinmen, other than the official planners, local entrepreneurs also play a major role in shaping the battlefield tourism brand by investing their own sentiments through the commodification of war symbolism. People go beyond the functional features when purchasing a product and "acquire certain symbolic features that are incorporated in the brand" (Aaker, 1996, cited in Freire, 2005: 347). I refer to the Kinmen *te-chan* (特产- specially produced consumer items) and how these products are marketed and consumed in accordance to the battlefield image of Kinmen. The "three treasures" of Kinmen, namely Kinmen Kaoliang (sorghum) Liquor (金门高粱酒), Kinmen Peanut Candy (金门贡唐) and the Kinmen Steel Knife (金门钢刀) will be drawn upon to elaborate.

7.1 The Kinmen kaoliang liquor

The consumption culture of kaoliang liquor started in North China. When the KMT forces retreated from PRC to Kinmen, the military brought with them the consumption habit and introduced growing of sorghum to the residents.¹⁴ The liquor has since become the most important export commodity and is inextricably linked to the island's battlefield identity. With the rise of tourism, local entrepreneurs have since come up with 'commemorative liquor' featuring the major battles for tourist consumption. The bottles come in the shape of tankers, helmets, army boots and artillery shells, marrying the consumption of kaoliang liquor with war commemoration (Plate 7.1).



Plate 7.1 Commemorative Kaoliang liquor in various shapes

¹⁴ This is an over simplification of the history of Kaoliang liquor. For a detailed description, see Szonyi (forthcoming).

The association of kaoliang liquor with the battlefield identity of Kinmen sets off a co-branding relationship. The kaoliang liquor is no longer just any liquor made from sorghum; it is “Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor”. Such a brand name “add[s] value to the basic product (brand equity)... and this [battlefield image] provides differentiation that goes beyond price competition” (Aaker, 1991, cited in Donald and Gammack, 2007: 46). Concomitantly, the kaoliang liquor, high in its alcohol content and believed to be only consumed by the strong and courageous, is also a brand in itself, which underscores the character of Kinmen as a military stronghold. The significance of ‘Kinmen’ and ‘Kaoliang’ as co-brands is evident from a Taiwanese tourist’s response:

I bought this bombshell-bottled Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor as a souvenir for my brother. For one, Kinmen is famous for its high quality kaoliang liquor. Moreover, the battlefield aspect of this island is represented by the bombshell bottle. People will know straight away that I have visited Kinmen. So, I am hitting two birds with one stone. I don’t mind paying more for the design.

(Personal communication, 2 June 2006)

As can be seen from this example, the symbolic consumption of the kaoliang liquor gives the local entrepreneurs an edge over other producers. Indeed, brand equity is effective in reducing the price sensitivity of a product.

During my stay in Kinmen, it was not difficult to notice rows of such commemorative kaoliang liquor on display in the living rooms of locals’ residences. One of the locals enthused when asked about the display:

These kaoliang liquor bottles encapsulate Kinmen’s battlefield history. Moreover, they are quite nice and unique...Something to show to friends and relatives when they visit us from Taiwan. So, this has become something like a hobby for me...collecting these bottles.

(Personal interview, 22 June 2006)

The branding of Kinmen has indeed crossed the domain of tourism planners into that of the local people. In fact, Donald and Gammack (2007) have highlighted the importance of “every citizen [being] an ambassador” and believing in the brand, as the key difference

between product and place branding (p. 61). For a successful and sustainable branding effort, the Kinmen locals must believe in the battlefield identity themselves. If this criterion is fulfilled, the people can be utilised as “the most powerful communication tool in the [island] branding toolbox (Gudjonsson, 2005: 288). As such, by collecting and displaying the commemorative kaoliang liquor, the Kinmen locals can be seen as “brand stewards” (Allen, 2007) in promoting and sustaining the battlefield brand.

7.2 The Kinmen Peanut Candy

The peanut candy is one of the Kinmen delicacies popular amongst tourists. The local entrepreneurs are quick to jump onto the bandwagon of battlefield tourism development to come up with war-related themes for the peanut candy. However, they are not passive followers, but make use of tourism to express their own interpretation of the battlefield landscape. For instance, Mr Chen, General Manager of Min-Jih Gong Tang, invented the “Bullet Cracker” series (Plate 7.2). These crackers take the shape of bullets and are specially packed in containers that resemble ammunition boxes. On explaining his rationale for creating these products, he enthused:

I wanted these peanut candies to represent peace between Taiwan and PRC. These bullet-shaped peanut crackers symbolise those bullets that were left behind after the war. We don't want anymore conflict, so the best way to deal with these excess bullets, is to eat them! The tourists love them. Moreover, people here are also finding this to be the perfect gift for relatives and friends who come over...usually for them to bring back to Taiwan. I am in the midst of designing more of such candy. Peanut candy in the forms of tankers, machine guns and grenades will be next.

(Personal interview, 1 June 2006)

Entrepreneurial innovations such as the Bullet Crackers, when bought by the tourists and locals as souvenirs, contribute to the post-place brand experience (Allen, 2003) of Kinmen. In this case, they help to perpetuate the Kinmen battlefield brand by purchasing these souvenirs and giving them as gifts to relatives and friends overseas. For example, when asked the reason for purchasing the bullet crackers, one PRC tourist replied:

I bought it for fun, not really for the taste. It is interesting and I like the peace agenda behind its creation. This serves as a very good souvenir for my friends back home. Who would have thought that you can actually eat a bullet!

(Personal communication, 1 June 2006)



Plate 7.2 “Bullet” Cracker
(Source: *Min Jih promotional booklet*)

Obviously, the bullet crackers were bought for their symbolic meaning rather than its taste. Although ‘piggy-backing’ on the government’s branding initiative, the local entrepreneurs are actively expressing their agency in the branding process by creating their own narration behind the products, which acts as a medium for relaying their own interpretation of Kinmen’s battlefield landscape.

Such a marriage between a cultural product and the battlefield brand provides opportunities for the local community to “develop and create cultural signs and markers that will be needed to attract visitors” (MacCannell, 1999, cited in Freire, 2005: 360). This is especially crucial for product differentiation, considering the fact that the neighbouring island of Xiamen has started to produce its own peanut candy targeted at tourists. Xiamen is the port of call for many Kinmenese tourists and the place of origin of PRC tourists visiting Kinmen, since the establishment of the ‘mini-three links’. During my recent fieldtrip to Xiamen Island, I noticed that there are many (特产) shops selling cultural food products along the major thoroughfares at the Zhongshan tourist district (Plate 7.3). The peanut candy is obviously a cultural product not confined to the Kinmen territories, considering that both Kinmen and Xiamen belong to the Southern Fujian region at least in cultural terms. Kinmen Peanut Candy is exported and sold alongside Xiamen Peanut Candy in these shops. In order to profit from a more successful product differentiation, the battlefield brand as perceptible in innovations like the “bullet crackers” ought to be utilised. It is by bringing the Kinmen battlefield brand to the world that tourists from around the world would be attracted to the island.



Plate 7.3 Zhongshan tourist district (left) and shop selling Kinmen Peanut Candy alongside other cultural food products from Xiamen Island

7.3 The Kinmen Steel Knife

The Kinmen Steel Knife¹⁵ is even more closely related to the war (Plate 7.4). Manufactured using the artillery shells that fell on the island during the bombardment by the communist forces during the Cold War years, it has gained popularity all over the world, and is often featured in media reports and documentaries. Major television networks like CNN from the United States, NHK from Japan and TVBS from Taiwan, and international magazines like TIME, all have had special reports on the “Chin Ho Li Steel Knife Story”. According to Mr Wu, Director of Chin Ho Li,¹⁶

The kitchen knife is used in every household...both in PRC and Taiwan. I want to remind people of the great sufferings caused by the battle. At the same time, this common household item would also remind the users of the kinship and culture that both sides share. We are ultimately one family.

(Personal interview, 29 May 2006)



Plate 7.4 The Kinmen steel knife made from artillery shells
(Source: Chin Ho Li Steel Knife promotional brochure)

¹⁵ Although famous for its kitchen knives, souvenir knives of varying sizes are also available.

¹⁶ “Chin Ho Li” is the name Mr Wu’s Kinmen Steel Knife factory.

In this example of the Kinmen Steel Knife, the battlefield brand is skilfully embedded in its creation. It might not be articulating the Kinmen brand as explicitly as the two consumables discussed above. However, coupled with its functionality and durability, the knife can be an effective “brand agent” in the long run. With continuing innovations in design and product development, the Kinmen Steel Knife is gradually transforming itself into an umbrella brand that hosts a series of souvenir knives that will certainly meet the preferences of different tourists.

The Chin Ho Li example illustrates how Kinmen’s battlefield brand can also be shaped through the production of consumer items by a local entrepreneur. The knife reminds the tourist of the existing conflict between PRC and Taiwan and conveys the message for peaceful reconciliation. Such product innovations serve as a medium for the local entrepreneurs to express their sentiments about the war and how they would like the war to be represented to the tourists.

The “three treasures” of Kinmen illustrate the production and consumption of Kinmen’s battlefield brand in a symbolic sense. They show how tourist consumption of such *te-chan* can interact with locals’ interpretation of Kinmen’s battlefield past, and when bought home, contribute to the perpetuation of the battlefield brand beyond Kinmen’s geographical limits. Therefore, the battlefield tourism brand is constitutive of and at the same time constituted by the locally produced goods. It is evident that local entrepreneurs, Kinmen people and tourists do contribute in one way or another to the post-place brand experience of Kinmen. Being a small, developing destination with limited resources, such Kinmen souvenirs serve as “creative and cost-efficient” (Florek and Conejo, 2007) branding avenues. According to Morgan (2004: 19), tourism remains a “highly involving experience, extensively planned, excitedly anticipated and fondly remembered. Souvenirs and mementos evoke and materialise those experiences...” Indeed, the Kinmen brand travels to places out of Kinmen when products created by the local entrepreneurs are bought as souvenirs by either the locals themselves or by tourists. Such behaviour starts off another cycle of ‘pre-place experience’ and helps in the attraction of more tourists to Kinmen. The post-place brand experience is thus an

important aspect in the branding process as it contributes significantly to the perpetuation and sustainability of the Kinmen brand.

The effectiveness of the *te-chan* in perpetuating the battlefield image has been recognised by the tourism planners as they are increasingly being featured in promotional materials about Kinmen. This shows how ‘bottom-up’ branding practices may influence ‘top-down’ decisions, thus breaking away from a dichotomous understanding of planners and locals of the battlefield landscape. The Kinmen Brand then should be conceptualised as “a negotiated reality, a social construction by a purposeful set of actors” (Ley, 1981, cited in Ringer, 1998: 5). Socially, island branding in and through tourism provides a platform for constructing a common identity and a sense of belonging amongst the islanders. Indeed, the manufacturing and sales of locally produced products can become a “source of pride that may be more deep-rooted than the ephemeral satisfaction of attracting inward investment” (Dinnie, 2004: 109). In economic terms, the many places from which the tourists originate and where the Kinmen Brand is promoted, experienced and perpetuated, become viable economic hinterlands of Kinmen Island

8. Conclusion: An eye on the future

Although tourism is just a component part of island branding, it is integral to the support and promotion of the island brand. This paper has attempted to highlight the intricacies of the island branding process by explicating contributions by the various tourism stakeholders in a dialectical manner. Through the different phases of brand experience, namely pre-place, place and post-place (Allen, 2003), I have shown that the Kinmen brand is a negotiated reality; it is a dynamic organism that feeds on both top-down branding initiatives by the tourism planners and bottom-up practices by local entrepreneurs, Kinmen people and tourists. Considering the political nature of place branding in terms of the vested interests in portraying particular images, I have also proposed the importance of locals’ recognition with the island’s identity so as to sustain the branding efforts. Meanwhile, the various case studies discussed espouse the pertinence of geographical particularity and landscape identity in the branding of Kinmen, so as to avoid the ‘homogenising effect’ of a singular ‘imagineering’ and/or

geographical imagination of 'island tourism'. Tourists of today do not merely travel to escape from their daily routine; they also yearn for new experiences (Iso-Ahola, 1982). "These new experiences emerge only if local places maintain their characteristics, culture and individuality" (Gnoth *et al.*, 2000, cited in Freire, 2005: 357). Therefore, if an island destination is not considered as different, it will lose its appeal.

In terms of marketing, Kotler *et al.* (2001) argue that with budget constraints, the clear definition of target segments will allow focused branding efforts in relevant media channels. As elaborated above, Kinmen is mainly visited by domestic tourists. The excellent products make it easier to create a place image and eventually, a strong brand within this specific segment. More effort should be spent on publicising in appropriate communication channels to reach out to this segment. Market research will be required to shed light on the target audiences, media usage and place image. This will complement the existing product to create a strong destination brand. Conversely, the emerging market of PRC tourists will require increased sensitivity to a different audience (Henderson, 2007). This includes catering to their needs and more importantly, sensitivity to the branding message. While the brand for the domestic market can emphasize patriotism and nationhood arising from the war, such messages need to be toned down for the PRC market.

To close, I would like to speculate on the future of the Kinmen brand and the branding process. To do this, we have to ask ourselves: Will the historical contextualisation of the island still be pivotal to the brand, or will it be downplayed? The answer to this question lies in Taiwan's political climate vis-à-vis PRC's attitude towards its perceived unclaimed territory of Taiwan. There are at least three scenarios that could be discussed:

- Taiwan under the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)
- Taiwan under the pro-status quo and economic-driven Kuomintang (KMT)
- Taiwan after re-unification with PRC.

First, considering the attempt by the ruling DPP to ‘de-Sinicise’ Taiwan early last year¹⁷ (*The Straits Times*, 30 January 2007; 9 February 2007), it would be a matter of time that the military island of Kinmen would experience the political ripples. If this were to happen, the historical context of the island will be downplayed in an attempt to sever historical ties with PRC altogether. However, the fact that Kinmen remained untouched throughout the de-Sinicisation campaign hints on DPP’s preference to portray the military island as a symbolic representation of the formal separation of Taiwan from PRC and the establishment of an independent political entity. In this case, the battlefield brand will remain relevant for the promotion of Kinmen’s tourism.

In the second scenario, the KMT will most likely strengthen Kinmen’s economic ties with the Chinese Mainland. The mini-three links that is currently restricted to the Fujian province on the PRC side might be expanded to cover more provinces. A large influx of PRC tourists is expected and the diplomatic façade of the battlefield brand as discussed earlier is likely to be more prevalent. In such a situation, the Kinmen brand will be particularly important in attracting tourists and inward investments.

Finally, in the event of re-unification, the battlefield image of Kinmen will still be maintained by the Chinese authorities. Other than the possibility of utilising Kinmen as a launch pad for stronger socio-cultural, economic and political ties with Taiwan, the island could be developed into a national education site to remind its people of the separation history and the tedious effort by the Chinese authorities in reclaiming its final unclaimed territory. With a war museum and military theme park already operating on the islet of Da Deng off Xiamen Island, there is little reason why Kinmen will not be incorporated into the larger plan for a ‘national education tourism corridor’.

In my opinion, the second scenario has the highest possibility of being materialised. In almost every possible scenario, the battlefield brand of Kinmen remains central for the island’s development and continual survival. Therefore, it is indeed advantageous in both the near future and long run that tourism planners and local

¹⁷Examples include the editing of high school history textbooks to downplay historical ties with PRC, replacing “China” with “Taiwan” on the stamps, and a proposal to keep away statues of Chiang Kai-shek.

entrepreneurs continue to invest on the battlefield brand of Kinmen. Contemporary efforts by tourism planners and local entrepreneurs to portray a less contested history between Taiwan and PRC, and a desire for peaceful settlement of their conflicts are welcomed. It is hoped that Kinmen, as a battlefield tourism destination, can function as a platform for people from both sides of the straits to understand better their past, and more importantly, that they are inextricably related to one another; socially and economically, if not politically. The island is thus envisioned to be a bridge for a much desired peaceful settlement of the ongoing political instability on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Acknowledgements

This paper appeared in its earlier form as a presentation at the Inaugural Meeting of the IGU Commission on Islands: 'Island Geographies' International Conference, Taipei (Taiwan) in October 2007. The author appreciates the helpful comments by and discussions with participants at the conference. Kind assistance and guidance rendered by Associate Professors V. Savage, Peggy Teo and T.C. Chang, as well as the anonymous reviewers who provided valuable comments on an earlier draft of the paper are also gratefully acknowledged.

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